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READING FC COMMUNITY TRUST: SOCIAL IMPACT REPORT

Summary of findings

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Reading Football Club Community Trust

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Executive Summary

This report provides a snapshot into a 8 month research study conducted by Manchester Metropolitan University to evaluate and evidence the social impact Reading Football Club Community Trust (RFCCT) has had on the lives of its participants and the wider community.

Reading Football Club Community Trust (RFCCT) are a non-profit organisation who act as the community arm of Reading Football Club (RFC). They deliver a wide range of projects that aim to achieve social change and improve the lives of the people in the South West of England. These programmes of activity are grouped within four different pillars, namely Education, Sports Participation, Health, and Social Inclusion and Community Cohesion. The Trust employs 23 permanent staff, a pool of over 60 sessional staff, and they engage with approximately 4,000 local people each week.

The UK Government are increasingly promoting sport and physical activity as a vehicle that is capable of making important health, social, and economic contributions to society. The increased emphasis on sport for development, alongside neoliberalism and austerity policies, has led to a growing need for non-profit organisations to demonstrate their social value.

This investigation employed a qualitative design to provide rich insights into the views and experiences of different stakeholders (e.g. participants, school workers, and employees) who have engaged with RFCCT. Specifically, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 individuals who have been affected by RFCCT's alternative education and employment programme entitled 'Reading Alternative Provision' (RAP).

The thematic analysis of the interview data revealed the key areas of social impact. Through the development of strong social bonds and by providing a nurturing and supportive learning environment, RAP's primary outcomes are enhanced life skills for its participants. The development of these life skills contributes to a variety of secondary outcomes for its participants, including improved educational attainment, enhanced employability, reduced school dropout, higher aspirations, better interpersonal relationships, and reduced offending and antisocial behaviour. RAP also makes valuable economic contributions to the community by providing work experience and employment opportunities for young people from the local and surrounding areas.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates how RAP specifically, RFCCT more generally, achieves positive social change and improves the lives of the people within the community. These findings will enable policymakers, funders, researchers, practitioners, and the general public to understand the social impact and value of RFCCT.



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Contents

Executive summary II

Context..... 1

Introduction..... 2

Research design and procedures..... 3

Research findings 4

 Nurturing and supportive learning environment 5

 Enhanced life skills 5

 Improved academic skills and educational success..... 6

 Increased employment readiness 6

 Reduced school dropout 7

 Reduced harmful and risky behaviours..... 7

 Higher aspirations 8

 Better interpersonal relationships..... 8

 Wider social impact 9

Conclusion..... 10

Context

Reading Football Club Community Trust (RFCCT) are a non-profit organisation who act as the community arm of Reading Football Club (RFC).

RFCCT was established in 1992 in partnership with the Professional Footballers' Association (PFA). Since its inception, RFCCT has grown into one of the UK's leading football related charities, delivering a wide range of programmes and activities that aim to improve peoples' lives across Reading, Wokingham, Bracknell, Basingstoke, Slough, and South Oxfordshire. The organisation employs 23 permanent staff, as well as a pool of over 60 part-time and sessional staff, who collectively engage with around 4,000 participants per week (or 208,000 participants per year).

Through using the power of football and sport, RFCCT aim to tackle social issues relating to health, sports participation, education, and social inclusion and community cohesion. By realising this mission statement, RFCCT seeks to achieve the following three goals:

Care: To ensure as a Trust that they prioritise the wellbeing of the young people who participate in their projects and activities.

Develop: To provide individual pathways that enable its participants to develop their physical, mental, and social wellbeing.

Educate: To improve the academic skills and educational success of children and young people through the delivery of alternative education and employment programmes that run in partnership with both local and national organisations.

RFCCT's commitment to improving the lives of the people within the community have been recognised both locally and nationally, with the Trust winning numerous industry awards over the years. In 2019, for example, RFCCT won the 'Activate Learning Lifestyles Faculty Employer Award for Supporting Students with Additional Needs' and the 'Silver Business Award for Creating Employment Pathways for Young People with Special Education Needs.' The Trust's dedication to using the power of sport and physical activity to address social issues is also demonstrated by their increased, year-over-year financial investment. At the end of the 2014 financial year, RFCCT's expenditure was £940,000, whereas for the financial year ending 2018, RFCCT invested £1.2 million into projects that ran in the local community. This represents a £260,000 growth in investment over this four-year period.

RFCCT have successful working partnerships with numerous organisations across the public, private, and voluntary sector, with its most important relationship being with RFC.



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Introduction

The UK government promote sport and physical activity as a vehicle that is capable of making important health, social, and economic contributions to society.

Alongside the increasing focus on using sport and physical activity for social good, the UK government have also implemented a wave of neoliberal and austerity-driven policies and politics in recent times. This includes the implementation of a rigorous, targeted, and 'payment-by-results' approach to public spending in community sport.

The emphasis on increased efficiency, user choice, and competition for contracts means that non-profit organisations are under increasing pressure to demonstrate the effectiveness and social impact of their programmes in return for the investment made. Therefore, the aim of this research report was to evaluate and evidence the social impact RFCCT has had on its participants and communities by providing rich and informative insights into the views and experiences of different stakeholders who have utilised RFCCT's provision.



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Research design and procedures

This investigation employed a qualitative design, which is a form of social inquiry that focuses on the way people interpret and make sense of their experiences and the world in which they live.

Specifically, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 individuals (3x participants, 6x school workers, and 3x employees), who have been affected by RFCCT's alternative education and employment programme entitled 'Reading Alternative Provision' (RAP).

RAP is a part-time or full-time programme for young people aged 8-16 years who have found attending mainstream school difficult. The provision is based at RFCCT and young people are referred to the programme from local primary and secondary schools and local authorities. Through providing high quality education provision, RAP aims to help students develop the skills and qualities to reengage into mainstream school or to leave at 16 with a range of qualifications and progress to further education.

The data produced from the 12 interviews were analysed using a thematic approach. This is a method that describes the data set by identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data. Essentially, this research aimed to use a selection of the participants' own words to shed light on the ways that RAP specifically, RFCCT more generally, has improved the lives of the people within the community.



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Research findings

The thematic analysis of the interview data revealed the key areas of social impact.

Through the development of strong social bonds and by providing a nurturing and supportive learning environment, RAP's primary outcomes are enhanced life skills for its participants. The development of these life skills contributes to a variety of secondary outcomes for its participants, including improved educational attainment, enhanced employability, reduced school dropout, higher aspirations, better interpersonal relationships, and reduced offending and antisocial behaviour. RAP also makes valuable economic contributions to the community by providing work experience and employment opportunities for young people from the local and surrounding areas.

Figure 1 below provides a thematic overview of how RAP achieves social change against a variety of primary and secondary outcomes.

The transformative capacities of RFCCT's RAP project and its key areas of social impact for its participants and communities are explored in detail below. All participants, as well as any other individual that they mentioned during data collection, have been given a pseudonym (i.e. a fictitious name) when quoted within this report to help ensure anonymity and confidentiality.

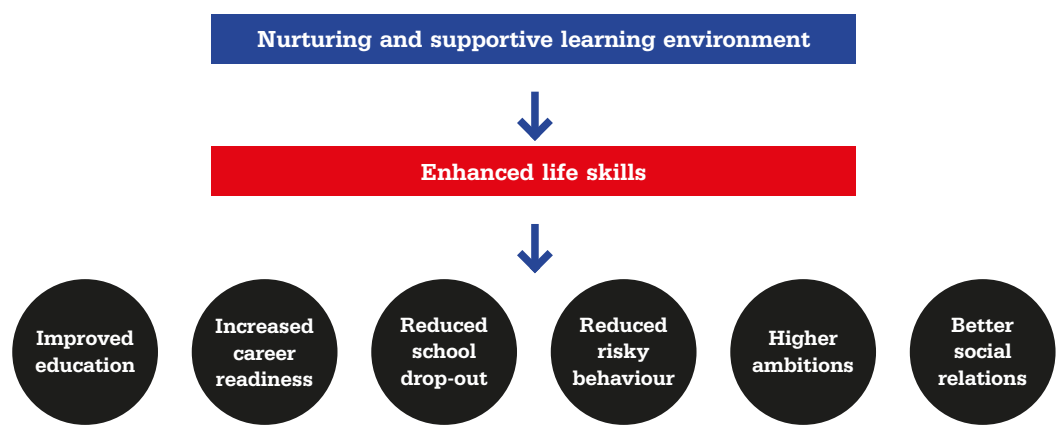


Figure 1: Thematic map of the social impact of RAP, including its primary and secondary outcomes.



Nurturing and supportive learning environment

Every individual who was interviewed for this investigation believed that RAP helps to improve the physical, mental, and social wellbeing of its participants. When asked what enables the achievement of this social change, our interviewees advocated that the primary driver is its nurturing and supportive learning environment:

It's an environment I like to be in, because they can have it with us (banter). Like, we bounce off each other a lot and, like, they're mature about it. Like, they're not just going to go off the wall at us for stuff like that. They know how difficult it is, and then all they really want to do is help us [...] They know about our backgrounds, how stuff is, and they do have close bonds with our family as well, through it. [...] [At school] it didn't really seem like they cared. But here, they got to know us personally. Instead of just doing their job, they built that bond with us. **(Gordon, RAP Participant).**

It's young. It's energetic. It involves everybody. It's very upbeat. It's got an air of positivity about it. For example, in the social areas, there's very contemporary music [playing]. There's activities such as [video consoles]. What I'm saying is it's not just about the football. The surrounding social element also is really important, and it seems to offer a very attractive way of spending time for young people. I think it brings young people together from many different schools and different sectors of the community. **(Carole, wider stakeholder).**

If you speak to them about their experiences of being [in] school, and how they feel disrespected by adults, not listened to by adults, not helped by adults, judged by adults. They come to us with a very poor worldview of themselves, of adults, of what we are supposed to do in society. So all of a sudden, you've got this group of people (RAP employees) who take these kids who are at their lowest, and they listen to them, they understand them, and they challenge them. The way that these Reading Football Club staff, when they understand and talk to kids is very, very unique. **(Toni, wider stakeholder).**

Enhanced life skills

According to our interviewees, the positive relationships between the staff and the participants act as a building block to help the young attendees develop their life skills. In particular, they expressed how the safe, secure, and motivating climate at RAP helps to increase the self-esteem, self-worth, self-efficacy, confidence, and communication skills of its participants:

Probably because where they are, where the staff are nice and when I probably first came here I thought people would be more strict. I didn't know, but now I know they're all nice it's made me more confident; [it's] encouraged me to get to know more and different types of people. **(Jonny, RAP participant).**

I would say that the building of positive relationships with adults, the building of confidence and self-esteem and communication are probably among the top skills that our kids will learn with these guys (RAP staff). I think their confidence and self-esteem has grown. And, I think their communication and interpersonal skills has grown massively. [RAP] has giving them the skills to be able to move back to other areas of society, which they really do struggle with. **(Toni, wider stakeholder).**



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Improved academic skills and educational success

As mentioned above, most of the young people who attend RAP struggle to reach their full potential at mainstream school. The support networks provided by RAP helps them to overcome these issues and challenges.

Most notably, the staff are able to change their perspective and attitude to learning, which in turn increases their academic engagement:

My education increased, because I never used to like doing education. And then, when they used to convince me to do it, I used to do it. Then, it slowly became into a natural habit that I'd come in, do it, then play football. Instead of come in and then going straight to play football and not do education. **(Gordon, RAP participant)**.

Without that (RAP), he wouldn't have gone onto where he's got to (full-time employment). So English and maths, he never wanted to do, it was just something not on his radar, but they got him to understand that, actually, you do need to do this in order to get to where you want to get to. So yes, in terms of academic progress, he wouldn't have even engaged with that if it wasn't for them.

(Robert, wider stakeholder).

The changes in the young people's attitude and engagement to learning can have profound, positive implications for their academic achievement and educational attainment. Importantly, our interviewees stressed that these educational successes would not occur without the intervention of RAP:

[If I didn't come here] I'd probably end up not getting an education. I probably wouldn't be able to complete my GCSEs. **(Jonny, RAP participant)**.

Yes, there's one of our students, he's just finished Year 11. He was at very high risk of being permanently excluded – very high risk. We tried everything in school. We tried different ways to support him, different ways to help him. We've had youth workers, we've had counselling, we've had family workers. We've had in-school support, we've had outside-school support, but it made absolutely no difference whatsoever. But then he

went to [RAP] for day release and it worked. We've managed to get him to do several GCSEs. Without RAP he would never – never – have done his exams; no. [Rather,] he would have had a criminal record and he would have been excluded permanently from school.

(Emma, wider stakeholder).

Increased employment readiness

In addition to improving the academic skills and educational success of its participants, RAP also provides its participants the opportunity to engage in a variety of work-based learning activities. According to our interviewees, this helps the young people to develop a range of skills, behaviours, attitudes, and attributes that will support their personal and professional development:

We have those summer camps and I normally come along. [...] This has given me more options in the way of jobs, [...] I'm learning things now that can help me benefit in the future.

(Harry, RAP participant).

[A pupil who] started at RAP, we created the opportunity for work experience for him. [...] He did two afternoons a week, which was out of school hours, which is quite unusual for children at pupil referral units. Also, he maintained that. So, I think the resilience he has developed at RAP is quite key. I think also he would not have had the confidence to go in the workplace without the skills that RAP has given him. I think the respect he has developed through RAP and, of course, the ability to follow instructions [contributes] as well.

(Carole, wider stakeholder).

Alongside work experience opportunities, RAP also provides its participants the chance to obtain extracurricular awards and qualifications, which helps to further enhance their employability and career prospects. As Gordon summarises:

I wouldn't have thought about the Sports Leaders' Level 1 or Level 2 badges, that would have not ever been in my mind-set to get either of those. And then, when I got them, it, kind of, motivated me to, "I want to get more of them, and I want them fast." **(Gordon, RAP participant)**.



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Reduced school dropout

Our analysis of the interview data also revealed how the skills and values promoted at RAP are transferrable across different areas of the participant's lives. For example, our interviewees explained how the personal and social skills that the young people develop through RAP are relevant and helpful for their engagement at mainstream school. Specifically, they described how RAP helps them to develop coping strategies to better manage the demands of the school setting, which in turn reduces the likelihood of them being excluded:

Harry: There are always people at your school who are always there to destroy people's confidence [...], to break you and they literally annoyed me to the extent that I actually threw a [cricket] bat at someone.

Researcher: Has that happened since you've been coming here?

Harry: It's not happened.

Researcher: Why is that?

Harry: I used to keep a lot of stuff to myself, I didn't really talk about it, as such, but now, because you build friendships here (at RAP), you feel it's easier to just talk to people. It's felt very nice just to talk to people [such as staff and other participants at RAP] and now all that anger that's inside just doesn't really seem to cause any reaction.

I don't think we'd buy into a programme that we didn't feel was right for the children that we're working with. So, you know, if it wasn't working, we wouldn't use Reading Football Club Community Trust (RFCCT). Actually, what we've found is that, you know, it has had, for the most part, a positive impact on their ability to cope within school when they're with us. **(Ray, wider stakeholder).**

Reduced harmful and risky behaviours

Another key area of impact was RAP's ability to address risky behaviours. The young people who attended RAP explained how the programme encourages its participants to develop prosocial attitudes and goals for the future, which helps to prevent and/or reduce their offending and antisocial behaviour. For example, Gordon described to us how the staff at RAP motivated him to stop his offending by changing his thinking, values, and behaviours:

I used to sell drugs often. I went through a stage of, like, "Oh, I'm not going to get anything out of anything, so I might as well go down that route." [...] I used to come here, I used to smell of weed and I used to have lots of money on me. [...] From [coming] here, I've realised what those drugs have done to people and, like, I can't go down that path and do something like that to someone. [...] The consequences are a 30-year prison stretch, and I'm not really looking to do that. So, that, kind of, put me off it as well. I can remember saying, "I don't want to do it anymore. I want to find something I can do, that's legal," and then we, kind of, built on stuff.

(Gordon, RAP participant).

The wider stakeholders who referred pupils to RAP also highlighted how the project helps young people to foster self-esteem and develop new skills, including perspective taking and self-management, which in turn encourages the young people to reduce their substance abuse and misuse:

The whole ethos of RAP is that you need to be fit and healthy. They promote the idea that it is less attractive to be hanging round with other youths possibly doing drugs, because health is important. [...] So, I do think RAP has a positive influence over other risk-taking behaviours, because they are taught they need to be able to run around and have optimal health to perform well in life.

(Carole, wider stakeholder).

The wider stakeholders also argued that RAP might be especially effective at reducing risky behaviours among its participants because it runs throughout the summer months. They were of the belief that the continuous and



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ongoing support over the summer period is crucial to RAP's ability to promote desistance from offending or other antisocial behaviour. As Robert explained:

The other aspect, as well, of RAP is they do run a summer programme, which is absolutely brilliant for a lot of our students because it prevents them from slipping into old established behaviours that maybe they don't have a chance to exhibit while they're at school.

(Robert, wider stakeholder).

Higher aspirations

Through improving the life skills of its participants, especially in terms of fostering self-efficacy and self-esteem and through the development of social skills, RAP also helps young people to re-envisage a more positive future, which further encourages desistance from a pattern of offending. As Ray and Emma explained to us:

Before I came here, I didn't know what I wanted to do in the future. I didn't have any idea I wanted to mentor kids. I was one of the kids who, someone would ask, "What do you want to do in the future?" and they'd say, "I don't know," and I said that for a couple of years. Then, when I realised the help they've done for me, I, kind of, want to give that back to younger kids, and try and put them back on the straight path, instead of going down what I went down (selling drugs and violence). **(Ray, RAP participant).**

I think RAP shows them that they've got choices. They don't have to follow the crowd. They don't have to join a gang. They can get respect by talking to people in a positive, decent manner. They don't have to throw insults around and use their fists to gain respect from people. They don't have to rule by fear. They can actually rule by using their intelligence, by showing respect to people. RAP does show: "Right, there's another way. I don't have to do what all my friends are doing. I don't have to go and [take drugs], and hang round the park. I don't have to be swearing at people. I can go out and I can earn myself some decent money. I haven't got to go and steal things."

(Emma, wider stakeholder).

Better interpersonal relationships

Another key outcome of RAP was improved social relationships. By providing a motivational climate that helps to improve the self-worth and self-esteem of its participants, as well as their attitudes, prosocial behaviour, and interpersonal skills, RAP helps young people to develop more positive and healthy relationships in all areas of life. This includes making new friends at school, as well as having better interactions with teaching staff:

Before I even came to this, I was not really a person who would go out and talk, I would literally just stay on my own. I felt, kind of, sad and then I came here. Obviously, people interact with you and I'd feel like, "Oh, okay, they're not as scary as they seem." You get to know more people and as you get to know more people, I gathered more confidence. I thought, "I'll try this at school," because I thought, "It's working here, so it might work at school." It did and now I've got a big group of friends. **(Harry, RAP participant)**

There's a young man who has been going to [RAP] for two years. The huge difference in the way he communicates with staff on site now compared to when he did two years ago, there's a massive improvement. He was very rude, very abrupt. He wouldn't show us any eye contact. He'd be very derogatory about staff, he'd laugh and snigger and just wouldn't give staff the respect or the time when they asked him a question he'd just brush them off. Fast forward two years, although not a lot has changed for this boy and his life, but you've got to understand the background of these kids, and what that child goes through emotionally at home. But from the perspective of his interaction with staff, he comes in, he holds conversations, he can hold good eye contact. He laughs in the right places, he's not rude or abusive anymore. I think it's down to the way they talk to him and interact with him at RAP. **(Toni, wider stakeholder).**

Importantly, the life skills promoted at RAP also help its participants to build stronger family relationships. For example, Jonny and Harry described to us how since attending RAP they have had better communication with their respective families (e.g. expressive, open,



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and respectful), as well as spending more time with them:

I do more stuff with my family than I would before. I probably interact with my family more than before I came here. I'd not talk to my family that much. [Whereas now I] go out for family meals, and sometimes just go out to my other family members' houses.

(Jonny, RAP participant).

Because RAP brings together young people from different racial, ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic groups, it also encourages the participants to develop cultural empathy and open-mindedness. This in turn can help the young people to build better and stronger relationships with people from other cultures. As Carole explained:

One of the aspects that I have observed when I've done other visits to [RAP] is that it's more than just white youths involved. There is quite a lot of different cultures. It was quite multi-racial, I'd say. From that point of view, when I came across a student who was quite fixed in some of his views, in a not very positive way, I thought it might be a good intervention for him to pursue a love of football but also to mix with many different types of young people, all who love football. And, it has proven to help him. He is more open-minded. He is more flexible. And he's more willing to engage with people from different cultural backgrounds.

(Carole, wider stakeholder).

Wider social impact

Our analysis discovered that the social impact of RAP was not limited to the individual and personal wellbeing of its participants. By providing work experience and employment opportunities for young people in the local and surrounding areas, RAP also makes an important economic and social contribution to the community. According to our interviewees, RAP is especially effective in terms of helping further education students and neophyte sport coaches to develop knowledge, understanding, and skills that will support their personal and professional development. This includes competencies such as communication, influencing, empathy, and emotional intelligence. As Kelly and Mike explained to us:

Some of our young people have gone and got some employment through the Community Trust by doing coaching in the evenings with Little Kickers and Kicks and the other projects [...]. The other thing is that the Trust also support our learners with is work experience. So, we put them through the [academic] programme and then they do their work experience up at [RFCCT], but they also get to go on their FA Level 1 coaching qualification, and if they show willing and desire, they are actually supported by the Trust to do their FA Level 2. [...] The work experience is brilliant because it gives them an opportunity to see what it's like out in the real world. It also gives them a better understanding of what is going to be asked of them when they're going into employment, and employability skills. So, they pick up skills along the way that are going to look good on their CV, so when they apply for something in the future, they are going to have a better chance to be one of those top five that gets interviewed.

(Kelly, wider stakeholder).

I've had a rough time in my life as well. I was homeless once for six months, I had to live with my friend. [So], when I first had the job [at RAP] I was a little bit... I wasn't that confident. I didn't know how to approach the child and stuff like that. I've done a lot of courses like mental health, first aid and all this stuff, so now I know and understand. It's made me more confident as a person. It helps me. Before I wouldn't be able to just approach someone and be like, "Hello, how are you doing?" Now I can. RAP has just helped me with my confidence. It's helped me to just go out and do what I've got to do and just reach my goals with helping young people. **(Mike, RAP employee).**



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Conclusion

The exploratory aim of this report was to evidence and evaluate the social impact of RFCCT by using a qualitative research design.

Specifically, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 12 different stakeholders (e.g. 3x participants, 6x school workers, and 3x employees) to generate rich insights into their thoughts, feelings, and experiences of RAP. Our thematic analysis of the interview data revealed that RAP achieves positive social change against a variety of outcomes for its participants. This includes the development of life skills, improved academic achievement, enhanced employability, reduced school dropout, higher aspirations, better interpersonal relations, and a reduction in offending and antisocial behaviour. RAP also makes economic contributions to society by providing work experience and employment opportunities for young people from the local and surrounding communities. These findings will enable policymakers, funders, researchers, practitioners, and the general public to understand the social impact and value of RFCCT.

While we believe that the research presented in this study will help stakeholders to understand the social value of RFCCT, we cannot presume that our findings are representative of the entire population of people affected by the organisation. The quantity, diversity, and different characteristics of RFCCT's programmes makes it difficult to translate our research findings to other areas of the Trust's work. Therefore, we recommend for RFCCT to undertake further exploratory studies into the social impact of their community programmes.



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